

# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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**BOMBAY - POONA - JAMSHEDPUR**

# NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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Birds around Bangalore by Zafar Futehally (Courtesy AIR)

When we migrated from Bombay to Bangalore in 1973 we were sorry to leave behind our human friends, but I was equally sorry to part from many avians which had shared our garden with us for many years. I had hoped of course that I would make new feathered friends in Bangalore, and in this I was not mistaken. We first settled down in Palace Orchards, and even in 1973, the place was far more open than it is today, and I have the pleasantest memories of many species seen in this locality. Undoubtedly the calls of the Large Green Barbet 'korr....Kutroo.....kutroo....kutroo...' cannot be missed by anyone who has the least interest in the outdoors, and it is fun trying to locate this grass-green bird whose colours merge so completely with the foliage of trees. Its scientific name is *Megalaima zeylanica*. Its call has a ventriloquistic quality, and it is difficult to tell from which direction it comes. The birds must have been amused by my vain attempts to locate them by following the direction of their calls. They are entirely arboreal and never descend to the ground - what an earth for, they might well say when they are frugivorous, and can get all the berries and fruits they need without coming down to the ground. Barbets are usually found singly or in small groups, but the whole population of an area keeps in touch with one another by their constant calls. They are not very vocal in winter, but get very noisy in the hot weather, and whenever there is an unusual sound, like for example the shot of a gun, the entire population start their chorus and seem to become agitated. Unfortunately, this bird does a lot of damage to the coffee plantations in Mysore, and since it is not an insect eater it does not compensate for the damage it does to the crop, as so many birds in fact do, by eating other insect pests and keeping their population down. In a sense therefore the bird is an expensive ornament of our environment, though undoubtedly there are several ways in which it plays its role in maintaining the balance of nature. It would be profitable, if such a study was made as an ecological exercise. It is said that in the past few decades the bird has become conspicuously common in Delhi because of the planting of a large number of Ficus trees. When we do our planting in Bangalore we must not forget the requirements of birds.

A species of bird which we enjoyed very much in Palace Orchards were White Eyes, known scientifically as *Zosterops palmerosa*. The sexes are alike and there are no seasonal changes in plumage. They live in trees and bushes, have a wide range of food: insects, nectar and fruits. According to Landsborough Thompson both parents incubate and hatching takes place in less than eleven days, which is the shortest period known among birds. Lovelier creatures are difficult to find, and the sibilant whistles by which the whole flock continuously keeps in touch with one another is testimony to the cohesion of the group. They are always together, and the energetic manner in which they inspect a tree for insects, hanging upside down whenever necessary

and peering into every leaf and bud, must make it very difficult for any insect to survive. Operations of this kind by flocks of birds indicate how effectively they play their part in keeping insect populations under control. We never saw White-Eyes in our garden in Bombay which is surprising because it is a fairly common resident species in Maharashtra. So meeting it in Bangalore was doubly welcome.

Some birds prefer to keep to themselves, and who can blame them. At best they tolerate only the near presence of their mates. The Pied Bushchat (Saxicola caprata) is one such bird. It is commonly seen in open areas in Bangalore, and it makes its presence felt by perching on the top of an isolated bush and calling loudly. The black and white plumage of the male is most becoming and the female is more sedately dressed in greys and browns, as is the case among the females of many song birds. The Pied Bushchat cannot be classified as a singer of any quality, but it is extremely keen to burst into some sort of a song, like many amateurs of human society are prone to do, without ever quite succeeding in producing a melody.

I would like to digress here for a minute to discuss why birds sing. Song birds sing because they want to indicate to their male rivals that during the breeding season they wish to be in possession of a suitable area around their song posts. This ensures that every family has a minimum area of land from which they can feed the young chicks, for when they arrive in the world they have a voracious appetite which lasts through the growing period. If there are two males who wish to take possession of the same plot of land then there is a conflict, but the birds sensibly do not fight with beak and claw, but by means of their song, and the songster who can sing the loudest wins. Occasionally there is physical combat, but as a rule this is not necessary. Nature believes in protecting its creation, and therefore, as Konrad Lorenz has pointed out, ensures that threat postures are respected by adversaries, and destructive internecine strife is avoided. Humans too are now, hopefully learning this lesson, and the two Super Powers are satisfied by building up their arsenals of atomic weapons past the overkill limit, and merely glare at each other across the oceans.

There is a classic study by David Iack on the Robin, and he points out that in human society too martial music played an important part in days gone by. Marco Polo's description of one of Kublai Khan's engagements is typical: 'As soon as the order of battle was arranged, an infinite number of wind instruments of various kinds were sounded, and these were succeeded by songs, according to the custom of the Tartars before they engage in fight, which commences upon the signal given by the cymbals and drums, and there was such a beating of cymbals and drums and such singing, that it was wonderful to hear.... and then a fierce and bloody conflict began'.

When we were in Bombay we had the opportunity of seeing some exciting song battles between rival Magpie Robins (Copsychus saularis) who wanted to take

possession of our garden. Unfortunately, Magpie Robins are very scarce in Bangalore, and I miss their vigorous singing during the breeding season.

One rather interesting sight which we used to see in the migratory season when we stayed at Palace Orchards was the congregation of Wagtails in the evening near Sankey Tank. There was a small puddle of water in one of the meadows, and just before sunset, hundreds of Wagtails of several species including White Wagtails Yellow Wagtails and Gray Wagtails, congregated near the spot. They went to have a bath in turn in a very orderly fashion, and after the bath they spent considerable time preening their feathers. Thereafter the entire assembly departed towards their roosts feeling very clean and spruce. I wish our municipal authorities would occasionally identify areas of this kind which are interesting and useful from the point of view of birds and free them from the threat of development. Such micro bird Sanctuaries could become places of entertainment and education for the human population. In England there is a growing concern for identification of areas designated as "Sites of Special Ornithological Interest". Whenever a rare species of bird is found nesting the site is cordoned off, and no development allowed, unless for very special reasons after the subject has been carefully assessed by knowledgeable people.

In Palace Orchards during our evening walks we came across several roosts of the Common House Sparrow. This bird hardly attracts any notice because of its commonness, but like all birds it has an interesting life-history. For one thing at these noisy roosts or dormitories only the young unmarried sparrows congregate, or so it is believed. All the birds which have paired, sleep separately around their nesting sites. This statement needs to be verified and here is a subject for some enthusiast to study. There is another interesting aspect relating to the life of the house sparrow. After pairing, if the male happens to be killed, the female is capable of acquiring a new husband almost immediately. Dr. Salim Ali in his young days carried out an experiment of this kind at the nest of a house sparrow in his stables in Bombay, and was amazed to find that the female was in a position to acquire several husbands in quick succession.

In 1975 we moved away from Palace Orchards, and came to our present house which is about 10 miles away from Bangalore city on the Bagalur Road. In this agricultural area the complex of bird life is somewhat different and the fields and meadows around our house afford a splendid opportunity for watching both resident and migrant birds. A pair of Large Pied Wagtails (Motacilla maderaspatensis) make their nests every year inside the pump cover in the well. Unfortunately they have not been too successful because their eggs appear to be eaten by Rock Lizards of which there are several around. Pied Bushchats also nest inside our well. Rather foolishly, the nest is placed so near

the level of the water that during the first flight out of their nest the young birds invariably get drowned. On one occasion I did manage to retrieve a young bird before it had got completely drenched, and I think that it



survived. This goes to show that birds have very little intelligence. They live mainly by instinct, and are incapable of learning by experience. Rather, they are not capable of learning quickly, but over a time scale of thousands of years certain salutary facts get imprinted on their minds and condition their behaviour.

We planted several species of trees in our garden with the object of attracting birds and it is a great pleasure to find that this policy has succeeded. The Singapore Cherry tree has become a favourite rendezvous for Bulbuls and the Hibiscus and Holmskoldeas are great attractions for Sunbirds. On the grassy edge of the compound, which has been left wild and untended mainly to attract birds, I was thrilled at finding the nest of a Bustard Quail. These birds indulge in their well known drumming calls which simulate to perfection the sound of a motor cycle in the distance. Incidentally this is one of the few species of birds in India, which are polyandrous. The female after laying a clutch of eggs foists the incubating and other domestic duties on the husband. We have flocks of both the White-throated and the Spotted Munias, and occasionally large numbers of Black-bellied Finchlark come over and give us a display of their fantastic nose dives from high up in the sky. Black Drongoes and Indian Rollers have taken up positions on the telephone wires, and they seem to have come to an amicable understanding about not crossing each other's path. Common Green Beeeaters roost on our Apta tree and occasionally a Pond Heron comes to our pond to investigate if the menu is satisfactory.

In the migratory season which is now on, it is the Harriers which provide the most dramatic spectacle. I saw the first Harrier this season on the 13th Sept. From the black wing bars on its silver wings I thought it could be Montagu's Harrier. As Eha says, these birds seem to be able to defy the laws of gravitation and float along on air currents just a couple of feet above the ground in a way which no other bird can. All in all bird watching is great fun, and I hope we will give a thought to the welfare of birds not merely during the annual Wild Life Week but throughout the year.

A note on Peafowl, *Pavo cristatus*, Linnaeus at Viralimalai Trichirapalli district, Tamil Nadu by Mandalraj Johnson:

Peacocks are fascinating even in pictures; witnessing their dance, fanlike erection of tail coverts in dazzling colours of blue and green is one of the thrilling experiences this side of Heaven. One can observe these rainbow birds, in proximity in and around Viralimalai.

Location: Viralimalai (10° 36'N, 72° 32'E, Altitude-450' above M.S.L.) is a known hill temple of God Muruga, twenty five kilometres from Trichirapalli, on the Melur Road. The hillock 583' above M.S.L. and the surrounding plain area support scrub jungle, of *Acacia* spp. *Wrightia tinctoria*, *Euphorbia* spp.

Zyzophus spp. Azadiracts indica etc. Paddy fields and other agricultural land and channels are close by. The rainfall is about 30".

History: Peacock being the 'Vahana' of the incarnated deity, peafowl enjoy protection and care. Some local people say that the place has been the home of peafowl from times immemorial, while others say that peafowls were introduced by devotees as fulfilment of vows, which is even now being carried out; both views may be correct. Peafowl are not wild in the true sense of the word and are semiferal.

Population and Breeding season: The following is based on observations, made during July 66, and confined to the locality on the Eastern part of the hillock where a 'babha' (Echi Porukki Samiyar - who eats the left overs) lives in a cave. The babha who seems to be knowledgeable about these birds communicates with them. I chose that corner for convenience and from there I could watch the movements of seven cocks and their harem. Two nests were found which were just depressions in the ground 5" - 7" diameter containing eggs which were covered by leaves. The writer's estimate of the total number of individuals is about two hundred and fifty while the 'babha' puts it as above one thousand. Breeding starts here by mid July and is over by September. Of the seven cocks, which were closely watched, only one (smallest in size) had five hens in its harem and all others had only two.

Movements - sign of fear: During the non-breeding season the hens wander about without attachment to the area. The hens appear to be bolder than the stronger sex, venture into houses and agricultural fields, where they cause considerable damage, which is tolerated with great patience. Cocks generally are very wary, keeping themselves always to areas near cover. Nevertheless a few cocks were picking the hands of devotees when they were offered gram. The sign of fear is manifested by craning the neck a few times and suddenly slinking away keeping the tail coverts and neck parallel to the ground.

Mating display: In all my observations cocks erected their tail coverts only when their harem was close. The cocks while dancing appeared as if they were closely watching the movements of hens (or a particular hen). When the hens moved away the cock either closed down the strutted train or moved on still 'dancing' towards the hen. The erection of tail coverts with frequent quivering, once lasted for 21 minutes.

Once a cock performed the 'dance' under the mid day sun in the open.

Territory: Of the seven cocks, one cock with five in his harem was 'dancing' in a particular locality only. It fought away other cocks if they crossed its territory (reported by babha). The other cocks danced in any open area (not necessarily elevated). This habit of peacocks dancing at fixed localities has been a known fact and we have many a place named 'mayiladumparai' meaning



"Rock of peacock dancing".

Invitatory display: In all my observation (14) the Cocks mounted the hens only after the hens sat on the tarsi and copulated in the manner normal with birds. The cocks were not found to be chasing or aggressive.

The following two observations, though made at different places may be relevant here. In the Zoo at Vaigai Dam, a pair of peafowl are kept in an enclosure along with waterfowl. Once in the evening (29-6-1967) the cock copulated without any dance prelude. In a mutt in Palani where peafowl are kept, a peahen was held down to remove hair from her tarsi, coiling and cutting into the flesh. A cock pecking some 20' away rushed to the hen and attempted copulation.

Could it be that squatting on the tarsi is a sign of response, invitatory display exhibited by hens to the courting cocks?

Medicinal Value: Stray dogs and grazing cattle cause considerable disturbance if not damage especially during the breeding season. It transpires from local enquiries that the arch enemy is 'Narikorevan' a nomadic tribe selling beads, needles and medicines. The oil extracted from the tarsi and its meat are believed to cure rheumatism, while the feathers and barbs, when charred and taken with honey is believed to cure hic-cough. It is not an uncommon sight to find these mendicants spreading ten or more skins of peacocks on the platforms. No one seems to be worried at the massacre of the National Bird-public apathy is appalling!

#### Early breeding in Bhavnagar by Rekha Shukla:

There is a small pond called Krishnasagar in the middle of Victoria Park. The year before last the pond was empty and it has been nearly so for the last six or seven years. Last year in June '76 there came a cyclone and due to heavy rainfall the pond not only got filled but overflowed. The Gaurishankar lake which is just near by was also overflowing. There is a small island in the pond with large Babul trees. Probably due to water and weather conditions and sufficiency of food, certain water birds started early breeding.

The breeding season observed this year in 1977 and the breeding season described in 'Birds of Saurashtra' by K.S. Dharmakumarsinhji and in the 'Hand Book of The Birds of India and Pakistan' by Dr. Salim Ali (Volume I) is given below.

Sl. No.	Species	Nest Observation date	Dha.'s Book	S. Ali's Book
I	Little Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	Middle of March	Aug-Nov.	N. July-Spt. S. Nov-Feb.
II	Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Middle of March	June-Sept.	N. June-Sept. S. Dec-Feb.
III	White Ibis <i>Threskiornis melanocephala</i>	Middle of April	June-Oct.	N. June-Aug. S. Nov.-Feb.
IV	Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	End of May	June-Oct.	N. June-Aug. S. Nov.-March.
V	Pond Heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i>	Middle of May	May-Oct.	N. May-Sept. S. Nov.-Jan.

N - North    S - South    Dha - M.K. Dharmakumarsinhji  
S. Ali - Dr Salim Ali

"Not only is this a matter of early breeding, but it is the biggest 'Breeding Colony' observed in Bhavnagar" said K.S. Dharmakumarsinhji when he visited the place. Bigness of the colony can be guessed by the number of nests of different species observed during March '77 to September '77.

Sl. No.	Species	No. of Nests (Approximate)
I	Little Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	50
II	Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	60
III	White ibis <i>Threskiornis melanocephala</i>	70

IV	Cattle Egret <i>Babulcus ibis</i>	20
V	Pond Heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i>	10
VI	Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	40
VII	Reef Heron	2
VIII	Pheasant-tailed Jacana <i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>	4

In addition to these, the other water birds were so common that this place has become a heaven for birdwatchers. It would appear from the activities of some of the birds that they might have bred in this colony but I have not seen or found their nests. The list of the birds seen is given below:

1. Little egret (*Egretta garzetta*)
2. Eastern Large Egret (*Egretta alba modesta*)
3. Median Egret (*Egretta intermedia*)
4. Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*)
5. Little Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*)
6. Lesser whistling Teal (*Dendrocygna javanica*)
7. Cotton Teal (*Nettapus coromandelianus*)
8. Nukta (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*)
9. Spoonbill (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)
10. White breasted Water-hen (*Amourornis phoenicurus*)
11. Indian Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus indica*)
12. Purple Moorhen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*)
13. Small Blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)
14. White breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon emyrnesis*)
15. Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*)

#### Correspondence

##### Ann Talbot Smith

Ann Talbot Smith has sent a cutting from the New Straits Times about birds attacking children and taking one for a ride. The note of 29-7-77 reads

as follows:

"Two large black birds with eight feet (2.5 meter) wingspans swooped into a backyard, attacked a group of children and took a 10 year old boy for a 20 foot (6 meter) ride, his mother said yesterday.

Mrs. Ruth Lowe said she was cleaning the family camper when she heard a scream from her son Marlan. When she reached the backyard, she said she saw Marlan who weights 70 pounds (31 kilos), about two feet off the ground fighting off one of the birds.

She said the birds then dropped Marlan and flew toward a creek.

By that time, Mrs. Lowe said, her husband Jake and two friends ran into the yard and watched the birds fly away.

"The birds just cleared the top of the camper, went beneath some telephone wires and flapped their wings-very gracefully-one more time," Mrs. Lowe said. "I was backing up because they got very close to me".

Mrs. Lowe said the birds were black with single white rings around their necks and eight-foot wingspans. "They were the biggest things I have ever seen," she said.

Mrs. Lowe said she did not tell police until Tuesday because she feared they would not believe her.

Logan county officials said, because of the number of credible witnesses who reported seeing the birds, the story is not being discounted. Several experts contacted said no Central Illinois birds would be strong enough to lift a child."

#### Birding at the Hingolghadh Nature Camp

S.N. Varu

I read the article Birding at the Hingolghadh Nature Camp by David Fernandes (Newsletter 77) and am tempted to write about what I saw at the same place. I attended the camp from 24-9-77 to 9-10-77 and served as a volunteer. I saw 105 species of birds during this period at Hingolghadh and its environs. (Mr. Varu has given a complete list of the birds seen and the Editor will be glad to forward this to anyone interested. The list includes the Blue rock Thrush, Leaf Warbler, White-bellied Minivet, Kashmir Redstart, Blue Headed Rock Thrush and White Eyed Buzzard).

J.S. Serrao

With reference to Mr. B.A. Palkhiwalla's note on Tarapore birds, my suggestion to him was to check up his record with the Blue Rock Thrush, *Motacilla solitaria*, and not the Malabar Whistling Thrush as is indicated in the note. I have noticed this habit of the Blue Rock Thrush of entering human habitations

either for shelter or gleaning for three consecutive winters in the Town Planning Scheme IIT of Bandra, Bombay, while the area was being built up and a lot of dilapidated or half completed buildings were found around.

### White tailed Plover in Britain

S.K. Reeves

Our readers may be interested to learn that a White-tailed Plover (*Vanellus leucurus*) was seen in Britain for the first time in July, 1975 at some flooded gravel pits at a place called Packington in Warwickshire. The bird was considered to have been an adult male and remained until the 18th July, during which time it was seen by hundreds of observers.

The bird breeds on the Kirghiz Steppes, in Transcaspia, parts of Syria, Iraq and Iran and there is also a small colony in Turkey. A few are resident in Iraq and Iran. It winters in Egypt, the Sudan, the Persian Gulf, Sinai and right across Northern India (chiefly in the North-west). It has been found as far south as Bombay.

It can be seen that to have turned up in Britain, the bird had strayed very far outside its normal range.

It is interesting to learn that in 1975 there had been eight records of the White-tailed Plover in Europe outside Russia. Until then, the bird was considered a very rare vagrant in this area. From the nature of the records, it is considered that probably less than eight birds were involved. Nevertheless, the records strongly suggest a genuine influx of this species north-westwards into Europe.

What is also of significance is that in recent years there has been a slight westwards expansion in the species breeding range, for example west of the Caspian and into Turkey.

The reasons for this westerly expansion, and whether it is of a permanent or merely irruptive nature, are equally obscure. However, it will be fascinating to watch future developments.

The bird, as the White-tailed Lapwing, is treated in Volume 2 of 'The Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan' by Ali and Ripley.

### Goldfinch in the Plains

S.K. Reeves

I recently received a letter from Mr P.T. Thomas of The Ornithological



Society of Central India, thanking me for my note, in the June, 1977 Issue of the Newsletter, dealing with the nomenclature of the Goldfinch (Carduelis carduelis).

Mr. Thomas expressed disappointment at the fact that none of our readers had expressed any views as to the reliability of his observation of this species in the Central Indian Plains, which he describes in the June, 1976 Issue of the Newsletter.

He adds that Mr Serrao of the Bombay Natural History Society expressed the view that a Goldfinch as far south as Indore was unlikely, but that he did not discount the possibility of a stray occurrence.

It is, of course, impossible to say whether or not Mr Thomas' observation was correct. Assuming that it was correct, then I entirely concur with Mr Serrao's view.

The most southerly occurrence of the Goldfinch which I can find recorded, is that quoted by Mr Thomas in the first paragraph of his article, namely at Ambala.

On consulting "A Guide to the Birds of the Delhi Area" by the late Mrs. Usha Ganguli, I can find no record of the occurrence of the Goldfinch even as far south as Delhi.

It is well known that birds sometimes stray very far outside their normal range, or occur in areas at times of the year when, generally, they never occur in those areas. I do not believe that this aberrant behaviour is yet fully understood, although it has exercised the minds of ornithologists for a considerable time and has given rise to much speculation. This sighting may well be an example of this type of behaviour.

There can, of course, be another explanation and that is that the bird was one which has escaped from captivity. I am inclined to think that this is the more likely explanation.

Whether Goldfinches are still sold as cage-birds in India I do not know. Certainly they were in years gone by.

As to the prevailing climatic conditions, no militating factors appear to arise, as the bird was seen in the middle of the winter, when, as Mr Thomas says, the mornings and evenings were quite uncomfortably chilly and the sun was mild. On this point, Frank Finn, writing in 1906 in "Garden and Aviary Birds of India", says, in reference to the European form of the Goldfinch as a cage-bird, that "It is a curious fact that they bear the heat of the Indian climate better than many of the native tropical birds....".

A correctionDavid Fernandes

I referred the identification of the Greynecked/Greyheaded Bunting to Lav-kumar Khacher who has spent a lifetime birding around Hingolghadh. He tells me that while the Greyheaded Bunting does, very occasionally, turn up at Hingolghadh - he has seen them on two occasions, the birds I saw would be the Greynecked Bunting Emberiza huttoni(?) which is very plentiful as a winter visitor to Saurashtra.

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